

First 24 hours

HO CHI MINH CITY VIETNAM



Where? Inland southern Vietnam
Why? For motorbike mania and Marx-meets-Mammon atmosphere
When? Dec-Mar, the dry season



Steamy old Saigon, Vietnam's second city, is hectic, hot and hedonistic. As the first ever direct flights from the UK launch (see p 15), Claire Boobbyer helps you negotiate the sights and street stalls...

Before you arrive

Ho Chi Minh City is almost entirely devoted to hedonism. It feels like a place permanently wired and pepped up by a winning streak. Its pleasures are found in the excellent restaurants, stalls, boutiques and bars; and in the nighttime *song voi* (living fast) motorbike cruising that electrifies fairy light garlanded streets.

But though HCMC is easy to navigate by taxi or on foot, crossing the road here requires throwing caution to the wind: pedestrians stride out into the traffic surrendering their safety to drivers who must steer to avoid them. Never, ever dither; if you fear mortal danger, raise your hand in the air and wiggle it like a fishtail - this signals pedestrian panic and the vehicles will slow or halt for you.

So, why risk your life? Come to HCMC for the culinary pleasures, the

louche bars, the French legacy and the old War relics. Learn a few words, and be polite (the local language is laden with courteous terms). Don't hang everything out: the Vietnamese dress conservatively.

Read Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* for its snapshot of Saigon and Vietnam prior to the French colonial empire's demise; Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* for wartime skullduggery; and Bill Hayton's *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* for in-the-making contemporary Vietnam.

Note that in official parlance the whole metropolis is named Ho Chi Minh City; the sing-song moniker Saigon officially refers only to District 1, but everyone still calls the entire area Saigon.

At the airport

Tan Son Nhat Airport (SGN) is 7km from the city centre, clamped to the north-western edge of the urban zone; as you approach, the plane

sweeps low over a fascinating spectacle: millions of motorbikes inching or zooming (depending on the time of day) along HCMC's roads. Airport immigration queues are not long.

There is left luggage, ATMs and banks. There is an 'information' desk but tourist info as we understand it does not exist in Vietnam.

Getting into town

The cheapest option is Bus 152, which runs every 50 minutes for 4,000VND (12p) to three central

locations including Ben Thanh Market, next to the travellers' zone of Pham Ngu Lao; journey time is 60-90 minutes. Official taxis to the town centre (140,000VND/£4.20) wait outside, although licensed drivers will approach you in hordes as soon as you step outside the Arrivals building.

Other ways to arrive

HCMC is connected to central and northern parts of the country by train; the train station (Ga Saigon) is fairly central in District 3. Cheap Open Tour Buses (hop-on, hop-off long-distance tourist buses) depart and arrive from the company offices in Pham Ngu Lao, District 1 (www.thesinhntourist.vn). Visitors entering Vietnam from Cambodia at the Mekong Delta can take cheap tourist minibuses from Chau Doc to HCMC (six hours); there are also slower public buses. >

WORST RIP-OFF

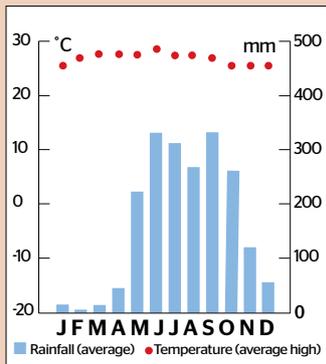
A rather literal rip-off, this: be street-savvy, as bag-snatching occurs by opportunistic motorbike riders. Keep possessions out of sight, securely fastened and stashed under tables at cafés.

< HO CHI MINH CITY ORIENTATION

Tour by Vespa, drink in an opium factory, sleep in style

Essential info

Population: 6 million
Language: Vietnamese
Time: GMT+7
International dialling code: +84 8
Visas: Required by UK nationals. A one-month single-entry visa costs £44, available in advance from the Vietnamese Embassy (020 7937 1912, www.vietnamembassy.org.uk). Visas are available on arrival at the main airports but only if organised beforehand with a licensed agency.
Money: Vietnamese dong (VND), currently around 33,000VND to the UK£.
Highest viewpoint: Bitexco Financial Tower is highest (262m), but better is the view from the Panorama Café atop the Saigon Trade Center (145m), the second-tallest building in HCMC.
Health issues: Drink bottled water. Take sensible food hygiene precautions. There is no malaria risk in HCMC. Get up-to-date advice on avian flu before travelling.
Recommended guidebook: Vietnam Handbook (Footprint, 2010); Ho Chi Minh City & Mekong Delta (Footprint Focus, 2011).



Web resources: www.wordhcmc.com for listings; www.travelfish.org/country/vietnam for a country guide; <http://english.thesaigontimes.vn> is a good news source.
App: Footprint Ho Chi Minh City.
Climate: Saigon is hot year round. It becomes unbearably humid in April, just before the rains break in May. You'll need high-factor sun cream. The busiest season is Dec-Feb and the European summer holidays. Tet, the Lunar New Year, is held in January or February (23 Jan 2012); transport and accommodation is booked out at this time.



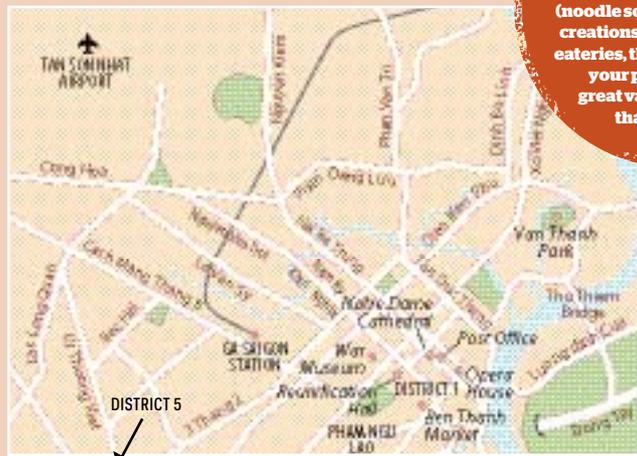
First day's tour

The best way to get around is on foot. However, to cover longer distances clamber onto the back of a motorbike (helmets are compulsory) for around 20,000VND (60p) a ride. Or ask drivers to take you on a tour: past the historic Reunification Hall, down Dong Khoi Street - passing the red-brick Notre Dame Cathedral, elegant Post Office and Opera House (*above*) - before cruising down central Le Loi and out to Ben Thanh Market, squeezing through

backpacker Pham Ngu Lao, out to the Chinese Cholon district and back along the newly developed riverfront. A Vespa tour with an Australian war veteran (www.vietnamvespaadventures.com) is fun and insightful, or take a slower-paced bespoke city tour (www.buffalotours.com). Have French cuisine for lunch at The Refinery (74 Hai Ba Trung), a former opium factory. At the end of the day, collapse happily in boho lounge La Fenêtre Soleil (44 Ly Tu Trong) for Indochine elegance and herbal elixirs.

BEST BARGAIN

From the food stalls at Ben Thanh Market serving *banh mi pate* (paté baguettes) to *pho* (noodle soup) to the shellfish creations of more luxurious eateries, the price of pleasing your palate is always great value in a country that's culinary nirvana.



First night's sleep

● **Top end:** Park Hyatt (2 Lam Son Square; +84 8 3824 1234, <http://saigon.park.hyatt.com>) The last word in luxury. Hung with art work and featuring sleek poolside rooms, a cigar bar, superior cuisine and an enviable location. Doubles from US\$250 (£153).
 ● **Mid-range:** Continental (132-134 Dong Khoi St; +84 8 3829 9201, www.continentalhotel.com.vn) Comfortable simplicity in enormous

rooms overlooking the opera house in a hotel that has had a pivotal role in recent history. Doubles from US\$94 (£58).
 ● **Budget:** Beautiful Saigon (62 Bui Vien St; +84 8 3836 4852, www.beautifulsaigonhotel.com) An upgraded backpackers' hotel in the heart of the budget district - a warren of streets. Here you'll find comfort, elegance and friendliness. Doubles from US\$29 (£18).

Stay or go?

Stay long enough to savour the exquisite gourmet food and street-stall snacks. Use the city as a base to visit the nearby war tunnels of Cu Chi and the luridly coloured dragon confection that is the cathedral of the Cao Dai religion at Tay Ninh (a combined day trip is easily arranged).
 As an antidote to city life, slow down on the Mekong Delta by visiting the floating markets at Can Tho (*above*), sailing the canals on

a sampan, and admiring the charms of authentic delta life at Sa Dec, home of author Marguerite Duras. Then head north: for the custard-yellow pleasure sands of Mui Ne and city-on-the-sea Nha Trang; the imperial city of Huế; the shops, Chinese temples and spellbinding charm of Hoi An; the charming Paris-of-the-East capital Hanoi; and the mountains, mythology and ethnic minority villages of the northern highlands. ■

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